America and the Muslim Middle East: Memos to a President

An Aspen Policy Book

Edited by

Philip D. Zelikow

and

Robert B. Zoellick

Property of the
College of Security and Intelligence Library
Please Return

For additional copies of this report, please contact:
The Aspen Institute
Publications Office
109 Houghton Lab Lane
PO Box 222
Queenstown, MD 21658
Telephone: (410) 820-5326
Fax: (410) 827-9174
E-mail: publications@aspeninst.org

For all other inquiries, please contact:
The Aspen Institute
Aspen Strategy Group
1333 New Hampshire Avenue, NW
Suite 1070
Washington, DC 20036
Telephone: (202) 736-5800
Fax: (202) 467-0790

Copyright © 1998 by The Aspen Institute.
The Aspen Institute
1333 New Hampshire Avenue, NW
Suite 1070
Washington, DC 20036

Published in the United States of America in 1998
by The Aspen Institute

All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 0-89843-239-1
98-015

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

From: Martin Kramer

Subject: What You Should Know about Muslim Politics and Society

What should American leaders know about Muslim politics and society? Precisely what most of academe, many denizens of the think tanks, and even some government officials refuse to acknowledge. The simple axiom is simply stated: in the Muslim world, the state is still stronger than society. Bear this in mind, and you cannot go too far wrong.

On the face of it, this appears obvious. If you are an American leader, you can only be struck by longevity of rulers in Muslim lands, especially if it is translated into presidential time. Jordan's King Hussein ascended the throne the year of Dwight Eisenhower's first inauguration; King Hassan II of Morocco, the year of John Kennedy's inauguration. And it is not just the kings who linger. Muammar el-Qaddafi seized power in Libya the year Richard Nixon was inaugurated, Hafez al-Assad effectively took control of Syria the same year. Hosni Mubarak succeeded to the presidency of Egypt the year Ronald Reagan was first inaugurated.

Surely, this is a part of the world where change is slow in coming. But bearing this in mind is not always easy because of the chorus of voices proclaiming otherwise. Authoritarian, personalized, ideological rule is destined to collapse, the political scientists tell us. It did so spectacularly in Eastern Europe and Russia, gradually in Latin America. At the time, journalists rushed off to cover the incredible stories, academics packed their bags and set out to advise the new regimes on the transition to democracy. It was just a matter of time, said experts on the Muslim world, and tired regimes would also implode in the Muslim lands of Asia and Africa. And didn't a precedent for this already exist in the Middle East? Hadn't the Shah collapsed spectacularly? Iran's revolution became the prism through which an entire generation of observers looked at regime and opposition.

The 1990s, many believed, would bring a second Islamist state into being, this time in an Arab country. Algeria was destined to be the first, claimed some analysts. And when the Algerian regime aborted the elections that nearly brought the Islamists to power in 1991, the same analysts called the coup a futile attempt to stem a rising tide. A leading journalist, writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1992, assured readers that the Algerian coup was "in many ways like the abortive Moscow putsch in 1991; although the process may take longer, it will fail for similar reasons."[1]

One year passed, then two, then the better part of the decade—and the edifice of the Algerian state still stood. The Algerian regime, it became clear, had much firmer foundations than the Moscow putschists. It is still in power today.

Yet the believers in an irresistible Islamism did not relent. In 1993, an American ambassador to an Arab country offered this apocalyptic prognosis:

> I predict, regretfully, that the region is fated to witness a wave of Islamist revolutions, successful or failed, over the next decade. To me, this is a likelihood with which we must come to grips. The regimes in place lack motivation, a vision for change, and support. The democrats have vision and motivation, but lack support. The Islamists combine all three—motivation, vision, and support. . . . Left to their own devices, the region's discredited regimes are likely to try to muddle through and repress opposition, its budding democrats are likely to fall on their faces, and its extreme Islamists can be expected to become the next agents of change.[2]

When expectations from Algeria dwindled, the experts cast about for some other setting where their dire predictions might come true. In the last few years, there has always been some regime said by these experts to be under imminent threat of collapse, some society supposedly ripe for revolt, if not revolution. Terrorist violence, wherever it occurs, is presented as a clear symptom of a deep-seated groundswell. And it is always those regimes closest to the United States that are singled out

by the experts as the most endangered species. In particular, many observers have speculated heavily against these three regimes over the past five years:

- Egypt was supposedly in danger of collapse when Islamist terror struck repeatedly in Cairo a few years ago. (In another *Foreign Affairs* article, ominously titled "The Battle for Egypt," a journalist wrote: "For the United States it is impossible not to compare the current situation in Egypt with the one that led to the disastrous fall of the shah of Iran in 1979."[3]) Egypt is the pivot of U.S. policy in the Arab world, the largest Arab recipient of U.S. aid, and a central player in the peace process.
- Speculation next focused upon Saudi Arabia, again in the aftermath of terrorist acts, this time against U.S. targets. Saudi Arabia enjoys a special relationship with the United States, and its oil is vital to the West.
- Most recently, there has been heavy betting against the regime in Bahrain, where there have been clashes between demonstrators and security forces. Bahrain is the base of the U.S. Fifth Fleet in the Gulf.

Yet despite the warnings of the Cassandras, these regimes are still in place. In some places, even the violence—never an accurate measure of the popular mood anyway—has been quelled. One may argue about the long term, where analysis fades into prophecy. But in the operational term, in which governments formulate policy, the existing regimes have held firm, and look likely to hold firm.

And this is true not only of regimes that are clients of the United States. It is also true of those that are not. When an American president called upon the "Iraqi people" to rise up and cast off the regime of Saddam Hussein, it was a plea of stunning naïveté. There was a Shiite rebellion; even at Saddam's weakest, he was able to suppress it. Saddam still rules today. From various quarters, expert voices are occasionally raised claiming that sanctions against Iraq, Libya, and Iran, were they applied with sufficient rigor, would push their rulers over the brink. As it is, all three regimes—the nemeses of U.S. policy in the region—are

reputed to be in economic peril. And yet they remain firmly entrenched in power, with no end to their rule—or their various crimes and misdemeanors—in sight.

UNDERSTATING THE STATE

Where did so many experts go wrong? They understated the power of the state in the Middle East. Looking at the Middle Eastern state, it is easy to see why. In most respects, these states are not models of legitimacy or efficiency. They are ruled by a handful of people—some are presidents, some are kings and sultans, and nearly all of them are rulers for life. The representative institutions that do exist are mechanisms of control rather than governance. Their economies are stagnant, weighed down by cumbersome bureaucracies and drained by corruption. In short, they look much like the Ottoman Empire looked to European observers a century ago: like so many "sick men," whose terminal illness has reached a critical stage.

But it turns out that these regimes have hidden resources and strengths. They are linked to elites, groups, sects, families, and tribes that have a strong vested interest in their continued rule, and that are willing to do whatever is necessary to preserve it. Beneath the massive inefficiencies of the state, there are very efficient security services that know how to ferret out opponents of the existing order. Many of the rulers, especially monarchs whose claims rest upon a combination of descent and Islam, enjoy a legitimacy invisible to outsiders but omnipresent for their subjects.

And above all, there is the absence of legitimate opposition. In Eastern Europe and Latin America, populist movements demanded the replacement of authoritarianism with democratic governance. They enjoyed moral credibility, wide public support and foreign sympathy. In the Middle East, opposition has taken the form of Islamist movements. These seek to substitute one kind of authoritarianism for another. Their programs contain repressive elements that limit their public appeal, and their willingness to use violence strikes fear in many hearts. Despite the apologies made for them by some Western academics, they enjoy scarcely any sympathy in the wider world. In short, they are neither

legitimate nor efficient, and their weaknesses are a source of abiding strength for the existing regimes.[4]

And where is "civil society"—that body of concerned citizenry, organized on the basis of interests, whose peaceful interaction is the basis of democracy? There are chambers of commerce, some political parties, a few human rights groups. But civil society is not dense on the ground. What is dense are primordial allegiances—to family, tribe, sect—which are exclusive rather than inclusive, and which offer consistent and dependable support to each individual. The Middle Eastern state has become quite effective at manipulating these allegiances for its purposes, and they are often its most reliable props. This interaction is the key to understanding the resilience of the existing order. While American social scientists, and the foundations which fund them, rush about in search of the familiar landmarks of civil society, real politics happen elsewhere.

For the present, the fact of state power may be taken as a given. What choices does this suggest to the makers of choices? In relation to friendly regimes, it suggests this: do not sell your clients short, do not underestimate the resources at their disposal for the maintenance of their power. This principle might seem obvious, but it is not. Given the craving among academic experts for basic political change in the Middle East, they will always be urging governments to promote political participation, human rights, democratic enlargement, civil society, or whatever other slogan is current.

An ideological policy of the kind urged by academics may look appealing as a rudder for post-Cold War foreign policy. But in Middle Eastern waters, such a rudder can only run the policy ship aground. The obstacles to the fundamental transformation of domestic politics in the Middle East are wide and deep. This is why every great power that has successfully defended its interests in the Middle East has adapted itself to the way politics are practiced there, from the Romans to the British. They exercised a profound influence on the Middle East in many areas. But in governance they left hardly a trace.

Is it really conceivable that the United States will succeed where the others have failed? The record so far is discouraging. The last time a

U.S. administration tried to impose a fundamental change upon a client's way of governing, the client went under. The Shah fell for many reasons, but one was his belief that the United States had abandoned him by making human rights the pivot of policy. The result was an Islamic revolution at least as contemptuous of human rights as the Shah, and still impossible to reconcile with U.S. interests almost 20 years later. Islamic Iran has served as a continuing reminder of the hazards of an ideological policy, of trying to export foreign norms of government.

The promotion of democratic transformation in the Middle East remains an appropriate mission for foundations, endowments, research centers, and Jimmy Carter. They have no interests to preserve and nothing to lose by failure. It is a dangerous mission for government. And in this respect, it has to be said that the makers of U.S. policy have largely resisted the siren calls of democracy theorists. They have preferred to invest their efforts in the Arab-Israeli peace process, where the United States has enjoyed some success. A great power can build bridges between its Middle Eastern clients. Only at its peril does it attempt to remake those clients in its own image.

HEDGING BETS

But why not hedge bets by putting out lines to opposition forces? On the face of it, this would seem the perfectly pragmatic way to reduce the risks of change. It is common diplomatic practice in most of the world. American diplomats and government analysts, ever mindful of the Iranian precedent, would make it common practice in the Middle East as well: they remain fearful of being caught short in a crisis, and so constantly press for latitude to conduct "dialogue" with opposition forces, especially Islamists. Here is one example from the mid-1980s, in congressional testimony by a former U.S. ambassador to Egypt:

> We must develop new modes of diplomacy, potentially involving Islamic leaders, for possible use in crises situations. During the Carter Administration, efforts were made by President Carter to persuade estimable Islamic leaders, respected by Khomeini, to intercede with the Ayatollah for the release of the hostages. It did not work because no

> Islamic leader could be found with the stature to confront Khomeini on an Islamic level or a willingness to stick his neck out for the U.S. But this type of contingency, i.e., soliciting intercession on an Islamic level, should be kept in mind and planned for well in advance. Hence, the desirability of sustaining close and constant dialogue with senior Islamic figures everywhere.[5]

And here is more recent advice, dated earlier this year, from a former undersecretary of state for Near Eastern affairs:

> Provide opportunities for political activists, including Islamist activists, to meet with American politicians and analysts, even if such meetings displease ruling regimes. That kind of networking, particularly in the countries with smaller populations, can be very useful in establishing personal links that could be important in times of crisis and transition. . . . When Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in Iran, he was an unknown figure to Washington. That kind of thing should not happen again.[6]

One can well understand the desire of foreign policy professionals to cover themselves. Many were pilloried for the debacle in Iran, and not always fairly. But their pleas for dialogue are profoundly misleading.

They mislead by suggesting that an established link to Islamist oppositionists could have made a difference in U.S.-Iranian relations, and might obviate or meliorate a future clash with successful Islamists elsewhere. As it happens, there was a Western government that had precisely such a link to Khomeini and his followers. France admitted Khomeini during the lead-up to the Iranian revolution. It was from a Paris suburb that he conducted his campaign against the Shah. When he returned to Iran, an Air France jet carried him home. The French, by their hospitality and solicitude, were absolutely certain that they would enjoy an inside track with the revolutionary regime.

Did they? Over the next few years, their troops were blown up in Beirut by Iran's clients; their nationals were abducted in Lebanon at Iran's behest; Iranian assassins wantonly killed dissidents on their territory.

Agents of Iran even subjected Paris to a bombing campaign, which prompted the so-called war of the embassies, during which both countries laid siege to one another's embassies. In short, the French got the same treatment as the Americans, if not worse, despite a policy that had effectively coddled the Islamists on their march to power.

The United States too, coddled some Islamists—the so-called Afghan Arabs, whose struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan enjoyed U.S. support. Even today, it is widely believed in the Arab world that the United States itself created much of the Islamist momentum by its support of these elements. Did the success of this joint effort with the Afghan Arabs win the United States their enduring gratitude? Quite the opposite: they immediately wheeled around after their Afghan success, demonizing the United States and inspiring the worst instance of foreign terrorism on American soil, the World Trade Center bombing. The foreign policy professionals claim that by "dialogue," they want only "to cushion the impact of the Islamist revolution that will come."[7] There is no precedent to sustain the argument that dialogue is capable of achieving anything of the sort.

The plea for dialogue is misleading on a second count. It suggests that such contacts can proceed either without the knowledge of the powers-that-be or with their acquiescence. Neither is possible in the Middle East. All such contacts will eventually become known to the regimes, and will provoke crises of confidence. A few years back, it became known that U.S. embassy officials in Cairo had been in contact with persons affiliated with the Islamic Group, the violent opposition to the Mubarak regime. When the contacts became known after the fact, the news created what Egypt's leading daily called a "silent crisis" between Egypt and the United States.[8] The dialogue also gave a moral boost to the Islamists. "The Mubarak regime is weak," said one Islamist participant in the contacts, "and it is our impression that the Americans are beginning to realize this."[9]

In the Middle East, it is impossible to maintain such contacts and plead innocent. In this part of the world, contacts with opposition forces are something cultivated only against one's enemies. When foreign policy professionals conceal or minimize this fact, they ignore one of the car-

dinal truths about domestic politics in the Middle East: there is no middle ground.

At best, then, dialogue is useless; at worst, it undermines the morale of clients and emboldens their enemies. And it must be said that the United States, in the last few years, has drawn just this conclusion, backing out of such compromising dialogues. There are many areas in which the United States has found a way to balance its Middle Eastern commitments, most notably in its relations with Israel and Arab states. Between states, even hostile ones, it is possible to open a middle ground, because states have use for effective mediators in their conflicts. But the one thing states will not tolerate is the attempt by foreign powers to establish themselves as mediators in their domestic affairs—efforts which they are bound to regard as hostile intervention.

A serving American diplomat has called precisely for this, urging the United States to "put some moral distance between ourselves and those regimes," and

> . . . make a more convincing case than we have—in our public policy statements, economic and technical assistance programs, and exchange programs—that we do support change through reform, that we care about the welfare of the disadvantaged, and that we do oppose the venal and corrupt practices of the regimes in question, even though we do work with them in pursuit of specific interests. In these situations, to the extent possible, our statements, programs, and assistance should be addressed to peoples, not regimes.[10]

Whether the "peoples" really desire this is far from certain. What is certain is that this is a formula for the erosion of U.S. influence over those who do exercise power, and who have successfully shown their determination to keep it against all challengers. Those rulers who have faced down radical Islamists, coup plotters, and assassins are hardly likely to flinch before an American ambassador or an AID (Agency for International Development) official. The state is still stronger than society in the Middle East, and to bet against it is to defy the odds. American leaders should know that the experts have misrepresented these odds before, and are perfectly capable of misrepresenting them again.

There is much talk among foreign policy professionals about the need for a consistent policy, a policy without hypocrisy and double standards. How can the United States speak of democracy, yet support the kinds of regimes it supports? But consistency on this issue would not build American credibility in the Middle East. After all, in the Middle East itself, the gap between principle and practice, rhetoric and realpolitik, can be breathtaking. There is only one form of consistency that earns genuine respect: you are respected for rewarding your clients and punishing your adversaries. It is in the nature of this divided region that there will be places where the United States is liked, and places where it is detested. But it should be everywhere respected.

CONTAINING ROGUES

There is another side to the enduring power of the state in the Middle East. What is true of client regimes is also true of hostile regimes: they are fixtures. Those who rule Iraq, Libya, and Iran benefit from the same structural advantages as those who rule Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco.

Once upon a time, the United States had a wider range of options in dealing with rogues. It could try to bring them down through cooperation with opposition groups. But coup-making today is as outmoded as the gunboat. Middle Eastern regimes have too many defenses on their perimeters, too many impenetrable layers around their cores. The American resort to sanctions—policies of "containment"—is an attempt to lay siege to these well-fortified regimes.

The objective of containment should not be the toppling of regimes, even less the transformation of the domestic politics of rogue states. Their regimes and systems are as deep-rooted as anywhere else in the Middle East, and attempts to uproot them would prove futile. In their domestic affairs, these states do not represent a much greater affront to American values than client states represent. Iran is not a liberal place, but neither is Saudi Arabia. Iraq and Libya are ruled by nasty men, but these polities are impossible to hold together without an iron hand, and the differences between them and most other Arab polities are of a degree, not of a kind. The issue for the United States is not whether or not the rogues respect human rights. The issue is whether or not they are prepared to follow policies that respect U.S. interests.

For example, it should be immaterial to U.S. policy whether Iran's elections are free or not, whether a new president turns a new leaf for women or not. Of course these things deserve to be monitored by the nongovernmental organizations that build dossiers on elections and human rights. But the U.S. government has the weightier responsibility of defending and advancing its interests. An Iran that actively seeks to undermine U.S. policy and prestige in the region—especially in areas like the Arab-Israeli peace process, where U.S. achievements remain fragile—such an Iran invites containment. This is the one test of consistency on which American credibility does rest, among clients and adversaries alike.

"GONE ARE THE DAYS. . . ."

Might the domination by the state be nearing its end? The theorists have their theories—and usually, they are Rorschach tests for their own preferences. Their debates continue to rage. To an American leader or the maker of an American policy, they are probably irrelevant. But certain arguments about underlying trends do occasionally creep into the margins of policy debates, and deserve critical scrutiny.

It used to be said that runaway population growth, combined with stagnant or negative economic growth rates, would undermine the Middle Eastern state, eventually making it ungovernable. The problem remains acute. In the Arab countries, for example, the 15 years between 1980 and 1994 saw population increase by 50 percent and gross domestic product grow by only 15 percent. Islamist opposition thrived precisely in this gap. But in many Middle Eastern countries, birth rates are leveling off and even decreasing, and some Middle Eastern economies are beginning to register significant growth rates. The prospects for more balanced growth now look rather better than they did a few years ago—a trend that can only strengthen the state.

American observers who long for change have now fixed their hopes on technology. "Gone are the days when government controlled the news," gushes one American professor.

> In Cairo, Damascus, Algiers, or Baghdad, international radio and television signals penetrate government censor-

> ship and bring images of the world that confound government-approved versions. . . . Access to modern communications technology such as computer e-mail—which inherently undermines vertical structures of control—is growing. . . . The proliferation of printing ateliers and corner shop photocopy machines ensures that people have more to read than government-dominated newspapers. Popularly oriented political tracts and religious pamphlets are readily available from street vendors.[11]

This belief in the liberating impact of information technology is echoed by an American diplomat:

> What is new is the mobility of information, ideas, and persons. Societies are no longer hermetically sealed. Even the disadvantaged have access to regional radio and television, polemical cassette tapes, and, in some cases, international satellite transmissions. They know that, in other countries around the world, there is the opportunity of a better life through individual effort. And, through these same media, they know that they are not the only ones in their region suffering their fate.[12]

There is something peculiarly American in this faith in the liberating influence of technology. But all technology has two faces, no technology is inherently democratizing, and the rulers have not been lax in mustering information technology for their own ends. People hungry for information put up satellite dishes—but governments pay to put up the satellites and jam them with programming. People buy computers to link up with global networks—but governments restrict access or maintain the phone lines in ways that restrict the flow of data to a trickle. The most efficient and sophisticated systems in the Middle East are the ones imported by regimes themselves for purposes of domestic security and surveillance. Satellites and computers, like the printing press and radio, may yet prove to be one more addition to the toolbox of authoritarian rule. If an Orwellian scenario for the development of information technology is feasible anywhere in the world today, it is in the Middle East.

At this moment, there is no development on the horizon that credibly threatens to diminish the state. The biological clocks of many of the leaders are winding down, but it would be wrong to assume too much from the absence of formal rules of succession or heirs apparent. Regimes have their ways of perpetuating themselves beyond their founders. In Algeria and Iran, in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, there are centers of power, and they have held. Such centers of power now also exist in Syria and Jordan, Libya and Egypt, Morocco and Iraq. There is every prospect that they, too, will hold.

AMERICA'S MOMENT

America's moment in the Middle East coincides with the era of the omnipresent state.

No outside power can choose its moment in the Middle East or the circumstances which prevail there when it arrives. Britain's moment began with the breakup of a 400-year-old empire. At that turning point, history became fluid. British agents like T. E. Lawrence made revolts, and British diplomats like Mark Sykes drew lines on maps that survive to this day.

Many American experts on the region envy the free hand the British had to remake the Middle East. The borders cannot be redrawn now, perhaps with the exception of the borders of Palestine. Yet in one respect Britain failed: in imparting democracy. It is here where many would hope the United States might make its mark. An American diplomat has argued that "one way or another, change is coming," and that "we have reached another turning point in the history of the region."[13]

But all the evidence suggests that the Middle East has managed to evade the turn. If so, it is pointless to lament what cannot be. The American moment in the Middle East has to be used imaginatively for another purpose. The Arab-Israeli conflict may have reached at least a bend in the road, and recent years have given the United States a chance to finish this bit of unfinished business left behind by the British retreat. The restoration of Kuwait to independence also constituted a crucial contribution to the final stabilization of the state system, building a wall where Britain had drawn a line.

To judge from these instances, the opportunities that history has presented to the United States lie in the promotion of stability. *Stability* is a mundane word. No one ever gained the fame of a T. E. Lawrence by advancing and enhancing it. But stabilizing the Middle East is perhaps the essential precondition for all other progress—economic, social, and finally political. It was an American naval strategist, not a British one, who first coined the term *Middle East* a century ago. It is now the only alternative to the idea of the Arab and Islamic world—an idea based on exclusivist identities that can only perpetuate ethnic and religious conflict. In building Middle Eastern stability, in strengthening the state system, strong states are crucial assets. It would be a mistake to cast them aside in pursuit of a romance.

ENDNOTES

1. Robin Wright, "Islam, Democracy and the West." *Foreign Affairs* 71, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 136.
2. "Political Islam: Myths, Realities, and Policy Implications." Speech delivered to the Salzburg Conference of NEA Public Affairs Officers, 21 Sept. 1993.
3. Stanley Reed, "The Battle for Egypt," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 4 (September-October 1993): 95.
4. On the character of Islamism, see Martin Kramer, "Ballots and Bullets: Islamists and the Relentless Drive for Power," *Harvard International Review* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 16-19, 61-62. For a detailed critique of Western representations of Islamism, see Martin Kramer, "The Mismeasure of Political Islam," in *The Islamism Debate*, ed. Martin Kramer (Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1997), 161-73.
5. Prepared statement of Hermann Fr. Eilts, 24 June 1985, Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, *Islamic Fundamentalism and Islamic Radicalism* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1985), 71.
6. Richard W. Murphy and F. Gregory Gause, III, "Democracy and U.S. Policy in the Muslim Middle East," *Middle East Policy* 5, no. 1 (January 1997): 64-65.
7. "Political Islam."
8. Salamah Ahmad Salamah, "The United States and Extremism," *Al-Ahram*, 17 April 1993.
9. Chris Hedges, "U.S. Aides in Egypt Said to Have Met With Group Tied to New York Blast," *New York Times*, 23 April 1993.
10. "Political Islam."
11. Augustus Richard Norton, "The Challenge of Inclusion in the Middle East," *Current History* 94 (January 1995): 1.
12. "Political Islam."
13. Ibid.